

Editorial

The Use of Tables

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In a continuing series of articles on writing for the *Journal of Wrist Surgery*, this article will focus on the effective use of tables. Tables are used to organize data that is too detailed or complicated to be described adequately in the text, allowing the reader to quickly see the results. They can be used to highlight trends or patterns in the data and to make a manuscript more readable by removing numeric data from the text. Tables can also be used to synthesize existing literature, explain variables, or present the wording of survey questions. Although they should be complete, tables must not be too complicated. If necessary, a large table can be broken up into several smaller ones. One should avoid including identical information in a table and a graph. Similarly, don't repeat the information from a table in the text.¹

The following are some practical guidelines on constructing a table.² (1) Ensure that the title clearly describes what the table is about. (2) The column heads should be descriptive and clearly indicate the nature of the data presented. (3) Write the table titles in the past tense and provide information regarding what is presented in the table, but do not present a summary or interpretation of the results. (4) When deciding which results to present, one should pay attention to whether the data are best presented within the text or as tables. (5)

Design each table so that it is understandable on its own, without reference to the text. (6) When presenting large amounts of information, divide the data into clear and appropriate categories and present them in columns titled accurately and descriptively. (6) Limit the number of tables to those that provide essential information that could not adequately be presented in the text. (7) Include only results that are relevant to the question(s) posed in the introduction, irrespective of whether or not the results support the hypothesis(es).

A useful chart on how to decide on the best way to present the data can be found below (► **Table 1**).

References

- 1 Durbin CG Jr. Effective use of tables and figures in abstracts, presentations, and papers. *Respir Care* 2004;49(10):1233–1237
- 2 <http://www.sfedit.net/tabfig.pdf>
- 3 Rodrigues V. Tips on effective use of tables and figures in research papers. Nov. 4, 2013 (accessed Sept 25, 2014; available from: <http://www.editage.com/insights/tips-on-effective-use-of-tables-and-figures-in-research-papers>)

Table 1 How to choose between tables, figures, and text to present data³

Use a Table	Use a Figure	Use Text
To show many and precise numerical values and other specific data in a small space	To show trends, patterns, and relationships across and between datasets	When you don't have extensive data to present
To compare and contrast data values with several shared characteristics or variables	To summarize research results	When putting your data into a table would mean creating a table with 2 or fewer columns
To show the presence or absence of specific characteristics	To present a visual explanation of a sequence of events, procedures, or characteristics	When the data that you are planning to present is irrelevant to the main study findings.

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